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THE GIFT OF HEARING

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". . . How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"
Acts 2:8 (NRSV)

I don't know about your home but there is an empty place in mine on Thursday evening at eight o'clock. We weren't always there, but over the past few years one of the very few reasons for watching programmed television, for me at least, has been "Cheers." That doesn't make me unique. The end of the series last week was billed as the television event of all time, one of those transcendent occasions by which we document times — as in "Where were you for the last episode of Cheers?" The final program was preceded by dramatic commentary as if history were in the making and we were going to see it. It was followed by extensive news coverage, interviews of the cast; and what in the world did you make of 15,000 people gathered outside the Bull & Finch Pub on Beacon Street in Boston — the tavern after which "Cheers" was modeled — on the night of the final episode?

"Cheers," if you are innocent of all this, is — or was — the name of a weekly television program that ran for eleven years and won a lot of awards. It was consistently popular. The name "Cheers" is the name of the neighborhood tavern in which the cast gathered weekly, mostly simply to talk. Sometimes the action went elsewhere, but not often. Mostly it was a group of people sitting around talking to each other; fairly ordinary people in fact; fascinating, in fact, precisely because of their ordinariness: Cliff, the mailman; Norm, who sat in the same place, nursing a beer, responding to almost everyone else; Carla, the earthy waitress; Woody, the child-like innocent, totally without guile; Frazier and Lilith, the psychiatrists; Sam, the bartender and focus of attention; and Rebecca, the manager/owner.

What I make of all the hoopla and the enduring popularity of "Cheers" is that for a lot of us a group of ordinary human beings successfully communicating with one another is a subject of some interest or fascination, or importance, or maybe even longing.

It was an interesting dynamic. They communicated — sometimes roughly, often with humor and risque innuendo, occasionally with tenderness, frequently with compassion. Nobody was ever excluded from the circle by the others. People were free to come and go; no one was hurt — maliciously; everyone was affirmed. The more you think about it the more "Cheers" starts sounding like church . . . an institution that likes to call itself a Communion which merely means a relationship in which communication happens: a community, Community of Faith, Communion of Saints, the Communion of the Holy Spirit, the Sacrament of Communion — the Sacrament of Communication perhaps.

So what I make of "Cheers" is that it addressed with modesty and a charming lack of moralizing and preaching, a very real human need — the need for community. Sam is not the first bartender who acts like a pastor or therapist, listening, reflecting, sometimes advising; and "Cheers" is not the first bar to become a metaphor for Church, where no one is judged, where everyone is accepted and affirmed: where everyone can speak and miracle of miracles, where everybody listens and hears.

That's what "Cheers" was about, I think — the miracle of hearing — and that is one of the oldest themes in Judeo/Christian tradition. It comes into focus for us on this day, particularly, as Christian Churches throughout the world observe Pentecost.

The theme is introduced early, back on the edges of history in one of our oldest stories: the story of the Tower of Babel. Both of these stories, the Tower of Babel and Pentecost, are not well served if we submit them to historical criticism and ask that quintessential Western question: "But did it really happen like that?" The question the writers would have appreciated, the appropriate and important question is, "Are these stories true? Do they lift up truth about us and the human condition that we can recognize and understand and think about?" I invite you to submit the stories to those questions. . . .

In the first and oldest story human beings are wandering around on the face of the earth. God wants them to scatter all over the place to populate and become diverse. They have other plans for their security however: a walled city for protection, a mighty tower to express their strength. They don't want to scatter. They mistake God's idea of unity in diversity for homogeneity. God is a pluralist, likes diversity, likes different skin colors, customs, cultures. God creates one family with lots of differences. The people, however, say, "Let's not scatter. Let's stick together with our own kind. Let's build a wall to protect us, pass a few restrictive covenants, organize an exclusive club which 'they can't join.'"

So God, this story proposes, looks at the situation and says, "This won't do. They missed the point; unity and diversity; communion and particularity. Huddling together in an isolated compound with your own kind, investing all your resources in a mighty tower — means trouble. Think what would happen a few thousand years from now when they discover real power and can really build some terrible instruments of destruction. Think what will happen if entire races and tribes think like that. So, in order to prevent that from happening, I'll scatter them — exclusivity and racial purity and ethnic singularity are dangerous and boring." And so God does what people don't want to do — scatters them and gives them languages so they will have diversity along with their unity.

If there is a logical flaw in this story it is God's consistent underestimation of humanity's ability to make trouble . . . a universal parental flaw, after all. What happens of course is that God's good gifts of diversity and language in which to express it become the instrument of more exclusivity and then hostility. Brokenness and fragmentation characterize the human community, not reconciliation and peace and community.

We invest a lot of energy and time and resources in the subject of communication. We know that the abilities to communicate, to speak and to hear clearly, are the basis of any human relationship. And while it isn't the only tool we have at our disposal, language is the most important vehicle of communication.

Language is powerful. Linguists observe that language does far more than describe reality. Language evokes and creates reality. We know that if you call a child stupid long enough, chances are the child will reflect the language. If you don't call a child anything — in love — that absence of speaking is a form of communication that will be powerfully creative. If you call a whole race lazy, unintelligent, tragedy will follow. Words are powerful.

Language can liberate and it can oppress. It is always powerful.

Garrison Keillor once talked about how the women in his family were the peacemakers who could and did express anger, and as they talked, moved toward peace and reconciliation.

> "The men were different he said, no noise, no shouting, only a quiet, bitter voice saying, 'I'm not angry. What do you mean, angry. I'm not one bit angry. I'm hurt, yes, but that's all right, I'll get over it.' A soft violent voice. 'I can't believe you would say that to me. No, don't apologize. You don't need to apologize. You said what you meant and I'll just remember it.' And you knew that he would. It would be weeks before he'd get over it." [*Leaving Home*, p. 155]

Walter Bruggemann, one of our brightest thinkers, wonders about what happens to people when they can no longer communicate: when they cannot, or will not listen to each other. He concludes that a dysfunctional community is one in which there is no understanding because no one is listening.

We are told to learn how to say how we feel. We are encouraged all around to speak directly and truthfully to one another. We are instructed to express our anger and our needs. All of which will not accomplish much unless someone listens to us . . . will not accomplish anything, I think, unless we devote equal attention to our ability to hear, to listen which sometimes, particularly in intimate relations, is the more difficult of the two. When no one listens, people stop trying to speak and relationships die in a kind of angry, deathly silence.

I wonder about what becomes of a society where communication is rendered virtually impossible because no one wants to hear what the others are saying. Bruggemann says communication and trust are linked. When you refuse to listen to another person, you are saying, "I don't trust you." So what do you make of a society in which distrust of public officials is the norm? I wonder about a society when its primary source of news information becomes part of the entertainment industry: when a trusted national network news organization blows up a truck with dynamite, films it and blames the manufacturer.

Trust and communication: communication and community. An historian by the name of Vincent Harding wrote,

> "Without the capacity to see ourselves as a community, without the common basis on which community must be built, we are in danger of disintegrating into hundreds of private, warring, special interests."
> ["Cauldron of Struggle: Black Religion and the Search for a New America" in Parker Palmer's, *The Company of Strangers,* p. 20]

Words which are made tragically prophetic by the appalling violence between Serbs and Bosnians, Christians and Muslims. The story of the ancient tower turns out to be a tragically true story after all.

So God, the parent, who in love always underestimates the child's capacity to make trouble, tries again . . . sends a word, a man who among other things really knows how to communicate; speaks clearly and forcefully — but listens, listens so wonderfully that all sorts of voiceless people start to gather around. He hears them. . . their pain, loneliness, alienation, grief. He is such a miracle of communication that they refer to him as the word. He is God's word made flesh.

And after he is gone, his friends who have become a community because they've picked up a bit of his communication skills, gather and something strange happens. They start communicating, which means speaking and hearing. The writer employs varied images to convey the power of it all — fire and wind. But the miracle of Pentecost, he is clear, is speaking and hearing.

German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, has written an important new book, *The Spirit of Life,* in which he argues that the capacity to communicate, to be in communion, is always a gift of God and further that when communion happens in human relationships, it is always evidence of the presence of God's spirit. We know God, Moltmann proposes, in human relationships, not merely mystical, spiritual experience. God creates relationships — not merely isolated organisms but beings who become what God intends when they are in community. He writes, "God the spirit creates the network of social relationships in which life comes into being, blossoms and becomes fruitful." [p. 219]

Lewis Thomas, biologist, physician, claims no theological perspective but he says something very similar in observing that use of language to communicate is what makes us human.

The miracle of hearing. The theologian says: "The creation of community is evidently the goal of God's spirit."

The scientist says, "We are compulsively, biologically, obsessively social. And we are the way we are because of language." [*The Fragile Species,* p. 159]

The scientists have an idea how language came about. It was the children. We know that when little children from different cultures are together, sooner or later they invent a language, complete with grammar, syntax, and sentence structure. They have a gene for language, Thomas says. Listen to his description:

> "When it first happened it must have come as an overwhelming surprise to the adults. I can imagine the scene, the tribe gathering in the communal compound of some sort, ready to make plans for the next hunt, or just trying to discuss the day's food supply as best they can in grunts and monosyllables, mildly irritated by the rising voices of children playing together in a nearby clearing. The children have been noisier than ever in recent weeks, especially the three and four-year-olds. Now they begin to make a clamor never heard before, a tumult of sounds, words tumbling over words, the newest and wildest of all the human sounds ever made, rising in volume and intensity, exultant, and all of it totally incomprehensible to the adults. . . ." [p. 170]

I wonder if Lewis Thomas was thinking about Acts 2:

> "They were all together and suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . and they began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them the ability."

So let us praise God the giver of the gift. And let us praise God by knowing that it is speaking and hearing that makes us human: that communication with one another is how we create and nurture and sustain our communities.

And let us respect the power of that gift to hurt, to render others as non-persons when we will not listen. And let us acknowledge that when we will not listen to one another we miss the richness and hope of "I love you. I care for you. I need you." And let us rejoice in the power of communication — speaking and hearing — to heal and make whole, to reconcile and make peace.

"How is it that we hear?" asked the people on the day of Pentecost. We think we know. It is by God's grace and presence that we are given the gift.

Garrison Keillor, in a wonderful essay, remembers the religion of his childhood. He and his family were members of the Sanctified Brethren — a tiny fundamentalist bunch which could be self-righteous, "cursed with a surplus of scholars and a deficit of peacemakers."

Keillor recalls "the Cup of Cold Water debate" about whether being kind to a non-believer implicated you in his non-belief. Keillor's Uncle Al had friends on both sides so invited two major disputers and their wives to dinner . . . not to discuss doctrine, but simply to enjoy Aunt Flo's famous fried chicken.

The day arrived. The awkward company sat down at table in silence — "gaunt, flint-eyed, thin-lipped men and their plump, obedient wives."

Prayer was a delicate matter. Brethren were known to use even prayer as a platform so Uncle Al said, "Let us bow our heads in silent prayer," and they did and the silence continued for a very long time, each trying to outdo the others in earnest piety. Brother Miller and Brother Johnson sneaked looks at each other, each determined to out-pray his enemy — until Aunt Flo, out of necessity brought in the chicken. And then, Keillor remembers: "Tears ran down Brother Johnson's face. His eyes were clamped shut, and tears streamed down and so was Brother Miller weeping. The smell of fried chicken had made those men into boys again. It was years ago, they were fighting, and a mother's voice from on high said, 'You two stop it and get in here and have your dinner. Now! I mean it.'" [p. 154-156, *op. cit.*]

The miracle of hearing — Communication — Communion

Amazed and astonished, they asked "how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?"

Amen.